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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000173

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SUBJECT: THAI ARMY PROVIDES GLIMPSE ACROSS BURMESE BORDER

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CLASSIFIED BY: Michael K. Morrow, Consul General, Chiang Mai,
DoS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) A recent visit with a Thai military unit on the Burmese border showed business as usual. An uneasy truce holds among Burmese troops and two armed ethnic groups in the area. Thai drug interdiction efforts there have reportedly had success locally, but have only diverted the Burma-based traffickers to other transit points. The Royal Thai Army works hard to maintain correct relations with its Burmese counterpart, but at the expense of addressing the root cause of the narcotics, refugees, and other troubles that emanate from Burma. End Summary.

All Quiet on Thai-Burma Border

¶2. (C) Royal Thai Army (RTA) officers treated Consul General to a briefing and border outpost visit during his October 16 visit to Chiang Rai province. The host unit was the 3rd Cavalry brigade (under the RTA 3rd Army's Pha Muang Task Force), which handles border security for a 217-mile stretch of Thailand's northern border with Burma (Shan State) and Laos. The security role includes defense, counternarcotics, immigration control, and general law and order.

¶3. (C) The unit flew CG via a Vietnam war-era Huey helicopter to a 3rd Cavalry observation position high in the jungle-clad hills on the Thai-Burma border near Mae Sai. The commander there pointed out to CG a scattering of military outposts across the border manned by three opposing forces: the Burmese Army, and two armed ethnic groups - the United Wa State Army and the Shan State Army. The outposts were easily visible without binoculars, keeping a watchful eye on one another in an uneasy truce that has lasted for several months.

¶4. (C) Prior to the flight, 3rd Cavalry Chief of Operations Lt. Col. Adisorn briefed us on military-related activities along the brigade's 93-mile stretch of the border with Burma's Shan State. His observations included:

-- Burmese Army repair and maintenance of roads in the area over the last year, to improve logistics support for its military positions along the border;

-- rotation of Burmese troops in the area every four months; and

-- no skirmish activity between Burmese troops and various ethnic forces in the area since late 2006.

Rangoon's Soft Approach Toward Ethnic Forces

15. (C) Last June the Burmese Army tried to persuade United Wa State Army (UWSA) forces in the area to disarm, but without success, Lt. Col. Adisorn reported. He cited two possible reasons for this attempt:

-- Rangoon's desire to show the international community its willingness to act against the UWSA, which is a major narcotics trafficking force; and/or

-- The regime's unhappiness with the UWSA for not heeding its request to expel Shan State Army (SSA) forces from the border area, and instead holding surreptitious meetings with SSA leaders.

According to Adisorn, the RTA believes the Burmese Army's unwillingness to force the disarmament issue with the UWSA militarily, or take direct military action against the SSA, reflects caution stemming from the recent political unrest in Rangoon and elsewhere.

Shan State Actively Producing and Transporting Narcotics

16. (C) The 3rd Cavalry claimed success in interdicting drugs

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coming across its part of the border from Burma, in part because of new x-ray machines recently installed by the RTG at the Mae Sai-Tashilek border crossing. However, UWSA producers have simply responded by using other transshipment points along Burma's borders with Thailand, Laos and China. Lt. Col. Adisorn reported that heroin production in Burma was on the rise given increasing acreage devoted to poppy cultivation - largely because increasingly destitute rural dwellers lacked alternative sources of income. The UWSA remains the region's leading producer of methamphetamines (capable of producing a higher-quality drug than other local groups in the business). Adisorn reported a downturn in crystal meth ("ice") production due to effective efforts by China to control one of the precursor chemicals. In response, however, this year the UWSA began to work with partners in India to produce crystal meth.

Layered Approach to Thai-Burma Cross-Border Relations

17. (C) The 3rd Cavalry maintains relations and communication with its Burmese counterpart via a township border committee that has met five times so far this year. The sides take turns hosting in Mae Sai and Tashilek. Higher-level mil-mil relations are handled by a committee representing the leaders of the RTA 3rd Army and the Burmese Army's Triangle Command, Adisorn told us. Above that there is the ministerial-level Joint Committee.

RTG Skittish on Broadcasting Into Burma

18. (C) On the margins of the Chiang Rai visit, CG met with the anti-trafficking NGO Development and Education Program for Daughters and Communities (DEPDC). Many of the girls it helps

are from ethnic groups inside Burma. One of DEPDC's activities is "Child Voice Radio," which is primarily a community radio station focused on anti-trafficking, AIDS awareness, English lessons, health and social issues, and some news. It broadcasts in Mae Sai and the surrounding area, including parts of Shan State, in Thai, Burmese, and various ethnic languages of the region.

¶9. (C) Shortly after the September unrest broke out in Rangoon, DEPDC was instructed to shut down its radio station temporarily, reportedly by the RTG's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). The ISOC cited concerns that the broadcasts might incite ethnic groups in Burma to act up in support of the anti-regime demonstrators. As of our visit, the station still had not resumed broadcasting, but had reportedly reached a verbal agreement with local security officials that it could resume as long as it provided the officials with Thai-language transcripts of the broadcasts.

Comment

¶10. (C) Although our visit provided a first-hand glimpse of only a small portion of the lengthy Thai-Burma border, the observations we came away with are consistent with what we have seen in recent visits to other portions of the border (reftel). The RTA works hard at maintaining correct relations with its Burmese counterpart, and tends to focus more on the symptoms of Burma's dysfunctional regime (narcotics, refugees, skirmishes with ethnics) than on the root cause (a brutal, authoritarian government).

¶11. (U) This cable was cleared with Embassy Bangkok POL Section and Army Attache.
MORROW